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MANIFOLD NATURE

BY JOHN BURROUGHS

IN these times of Nature study and floods of Nature books, many persons are inclined to think of Nature as meaning birds and flowers and summer breezes and murmuring streams, and so on. But Nature is not summed up by her fairer forms and gentler influences alone, though these may be the expression of those forces and conditions that go hand in hand with the things that make for our development and well-being. Probably not till flowers bloomed and birds sang was the earth ripe for man. Not till the bow appeared on the retreating storm-cloud was anything like human life possible.

Of savage, elemental Nature—"Nature red in tooth and claw," or black in tempest and earthquake, or hideous in war and pestilence—our poets and Nature students make little, while devout souls seem to experience a cosmic chill when they think of these things.

The majority of persons, I fancy, when they think seriously of the problem, look upon Nature as a sort of connecting link between man and some higher power, neither wholly good nor wholly bad; divine in some aspects, diabolical in others; ministering to our bodies, but hampering and obstructing our souls. They see her a goddess one hour, and a fury the next; destroying life as freely as she gives it; arming one form to devour another; crushing or destroying the fairest as soon as the ugliest; limited in her scope and powers, and not complete in herself, but demanding the existence of something above and beyond herself.

Pious man has taken himself out of the category of natural things, both in his origin and in his destiny. Such a gulf separates him from all other creatures, and his mastery over them is so complete, that he looks upon himself as ex-

ceptional, and as belonging to another order. Nature is only his stepmother, and treats him with the harshness and indifference that so often characterize that relation.

When Wordsworth declared himself a worshiper of Nature, was he thinking of Nature as a whole, or only of an abridged and expurgated nature—Nature in her milder and more beneficent aspects? Was it not the Westmoreland Nature of which he was a worshiper?—a sweet rural Nature, with grassy fells and murmuring streams and bird-haunted solitudes? What would have been his emotion in the desert, in the arctic snows, or in the pestilential forests and jungles of the tropics? Very likely, just what the emotion of most of us would be—a feeling that here are the savage and forbidding and hostile aspects of Nature against which we need to be on our guard. That creative eye and ear to which Wordsworth refers is what mainly distinguishes the attitude of the modern poet toward Nature from the ancient. Sympathy is always creative—“ thanks to the human heart by which we live.”

The Wordsworthian Nature was of the subjective order; he found it in his own heart, in his dreams by his own fire-side, in moments of soul dilation on his Westmoreland hills, when the meanest flowers that blow could bring to him “ thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”

The Nature that to Wordsworth never betrays us, and to Milton was “ wise and frugal,” is a humanized, man-made Nature. The Nature we know and wrest our living from, and try to drive sharp bargains with, is of quite a different order. It is no more constant than inconstant, no more wise and frugal than foolish and dissipated; it is not human at all, but unhuman.

When we infuse into it our own idealism, or recreate it in our own image, then we have the Nature of the poets, the Nature that consciously ministers to us and makes the world beautiful for our sake.

Emerson's first little book, called *Nature*, was about the earliest in this country to reflect the new attitude toward this subject. The book has no direct scientific import, but only a literary and religious import. The uses of Nature to the body and its uses to the mind and soul—one chapter to the former and five to the latter. When he says the aspect of Nature is devout, like the figure of Jesus when he stands with bended head and hands folded upon the breast, we see what

a subjective and humanized Nature, a Nature of his own creation, he is considering. His book is not an interpretation of Nature, but an interpretation of the writer's own soul. It is not Nature which stands in an attitude of devotion with bowed head, but Emerson's own spirit in the presence of Nature, or of what he reads into Nature. Yet the Emerson soul is a part of Nature—a peculiar manifestation of its qualities and possibilities, developed through centuries of the interaction of man upon man, through culture, books, religion, meditation.

“The ruin or the blank that we see when we look at Nature,” he says, “is in our own eye.” Is it not equally true that the harmony and perfection that we see are in our own eye? In fact, are not all the qualities and attributes which we ascribe to Nature equally the creation of our own minds? The beauty, the sublimity, the power of Nature are experiences of the beholder. The drudge in the fields does not experience them, but the poet, the thinker, the seer, does. The ruin or the blank which we see in Nature becomes very real to us when we come to deal with Nature practically, when we seek her for specific ends, when we go to her to get our living. But when we go to her in the spirit of disinterested science, the desert, the volcano, the path of the cyclone, are full of the same old meanings, the play-ground of the same old elements and forces. Nature is what we make her.

Man is the only creature that turns upon Nature and judges her; he turns upon his own body and mind and judges them; he judges the work of his own hands; he is critical toward all things that surround him; he brings this faculty of judgment into the world.

Emerson refers to “the great Nature in which we rest as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere.” The earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere in the same sense that it lies in the soft arms of its own grasses and flowers; the atmosphere is an appendage of the earth. If the earth literally lies in anything, it is in the soft arms of the all-pervasive ether. Emerson's statement is the inevitable poetizing of Nature in which we all indulge. We make soft arms for our thoughts to lie in, and peaceful paths for our feet to walk in, whatever the literal truth may be. This is the way of art, of poetry, of religion. The way of science and of practical life is a different way. The soft arms become hard with

purpose, and rest and contemplation give place to intense activity. I would not have the poet change his way; Nature as reflected in his mind soothes and charms us; it takes on hues from that light which never was on sea or land. But we cannot dispense with the way of science, which makes paths and highways for us through the wilderness of impersonal laws, and forces that surge and roar around us. One gives us beauty and one gives us power; one brings a weapon to the hand, the other brings solace to the spirit.

When the poet Bryant identifies God with tempests and thunderbolts, with "whirlwinds that uproot the woods and drown the villages," or with the tidal wave that overwhelms the cities, "with the wrath of the mad, unchained elements,"—"tremendous tokens of thy power,"—does he make God more lovable or desirable? Well may he say, "From these sterner aspects of thy face, spare me and mine." By way of contrast let me recall that when an earthquake shook California, John Muir cheered himself and friends by saying it was only Mother Earth trotting her children fondly upon her knee! If we identify God with all of Nature, this wrathful Hebrew Jehovah of Bryant is a legitimate conception. There are times when the aerial forces behave like a raving maniac bent upon the destruction of the world—the insensate powers run amuck upon all living things. This is not the God we habitually love and worship, but it is a God from whom there is no escape. As the result of the inevitable action of the natural irrational or unrational forces, tempests and earthquakes and tidal waves do not disturb us; but as the will and purpose of an Almighty being, Creator of heaven and earth, they give all pious souls a fearful shake-up. We take refuge in such phrases as "the inscrutable ways of God," or "the mysteries of Providence," a Providence whose ways are assuredly "past finding out."

Our State Commissioner of Education, Dr. Finley, in an agricultural address on "Potatoes and Boys," shows God co-operating with the farmer in a way that amused me. "The Almighty," the Commissioner said, "can make, unaided of man, potatoes, but only small potatoes, and of acrid taste. He had to make a primitive man and even teach him to use a hoe, before He, the Omnipotent One, could grow a patch of potatoes." The wild potato, he implied, like the wild grape, the wild apple, the wild melon, was the work of God before he had man to help him; now, with man's help, we have all the im-

proved varieties of potatoes and fruits. We have heard a good deal about the co-operation of man with God, and as a concrete example this potato-growing partnership is very interesting. How far from our habitual attitude of mind is the thought that the Higher Powers concern themselves about our potatoes or our turnips or our pumpkin crop, or have any part or lot in it!

Sir Thomas Browne calls Nature the art of God. Viewed in this light we get a new conception of Nature, the artistic conception. We do not ask: Is it good or bad, for us or against us? we are intent on its symbolical or ideal character. Through it God expresses himself as the artist does, be he painter, poet, or musician, through his work, blending the various elements—the light and shade, the good and the bad, the positive and the negative—into a vital, harmonious whole. Creation becomes a picture, or a drama, or a symphony, in which all life plays its part, in which all scenes and conditions, all elemental processes and displays, play their part and unite to make a vast artistic whole. The contradictions in life, the high lights, the deep shadows, the imperfections, the neutral spaces, are but the devices of the artist to enhance the total effect of his work. In ethics and religion we ask of a thing: “Is it good?” In philosophy: “Is it true?” In science: “Is it a fact, and verifiable?” But in art we ask: “Is it beautiful?” or “Is it a real creation?” “Is it one with the vital and flowing currents of the world?”

The artist alone is the creator among men; he is disinterested; he has no purpose but to rival Nature; he subordinates the parts to the whole; he illustrates the divine law of indications. The bold, literal truth is not for him, but the illusive, the suggestive, the ideal truth. He does not ask what life or Nature are for, or are they good or bad, but he interprets them in terms of the relation of their parts, he reads them in the light of his own soul. He knows there is no picture without shadows, no music without discords, no growth without decay. The artist has “no axe to grind”; to him all is right with the world, however out of joint it may be in our self-seeking lives. Art is synthetic, and puts a soul under the ribs of Death. Science is a straight line, but Art is symbolized by the curve.

To regard Nature, therefore, as the art of God, is to see it complete in itself; all the disharmonies vanish, all our per-

plexing problems are solved. The earth and the heavens are not for our private good alone, but for all other things. Opposites are blended. Good and bad are relative; heaven and hell are light and shade in the same picture. Our happiness or our misery are secondary; they are the pigments on the painter's palette. The beauty of Nature is its harmony with our constitution; its terror emphasizes our weakness.

Where does the great artist get his laws of art but from his insight into the spirit and method of Nature? They are reflected in his own heart, the act of creation repeats itself in his own handiwork. The true artist has no secondary aims—not to teach or to preach, nor to praise, nor condemn; but to portray, and to show us, through the particular, the road to the universal.

Eckermann reports Goethe as saying to him that "Nature's intuitions are always good"; but if questioned, Goethe would hardly have maintained that the clouds, the winds, the streams, the tides, gravity, cohesion, and so on, have intentions of any sort, much less intentions directed to us or away from us. Even the wisest among us thus make man the aim and object of Nature. We impose our own psychology upon the very rock and trees.

Goethe always read into Nature his own human traits; always when he speaks of her he speaks as an artist and poet. He said to Eckermann that Nature "is always true, always serious, always severe; she is always right, and the errors and faults are always those of man. The man who is incapable of appreciating her, she despises; and only to the apt, the pure, the true, does she resign herself and reveal her secrets. The understanding will not reach her; man must be capable of elevating himself to the highest Reason to come into that contact with the Divinity which manifests in the primitive phenomena which dwell behind them and from which they proceed. The divinity works in the living, not in the dead; in the becoming and changing, not in the become and the fixed. Therefore, reason, with its tendency toward the divine, has only to do with the becoming, the living; but understanding has to do with the become, the already fixed, that it may make use of it." In this last we see the germ of Bergson's philosophy. The divinity that dwells behind phenomena, and from which they proceed, is the attempt of the human mind to find the end of that which has no end, the law of causation.

This brings me to say that Walt Whitman's attitude toward Nature stands out in contrast with that of all other poets, ancient or modern. It was not that of the poet who draws his themes from Nature, or makes much of the gentler and fairer forms of wood and field, spring and summer, shore and mountain, as has been so largely the custom of poets from Virgil down. Take all the Nature lyrics and idyls out of English and American poetry, and how have you impoverished it, how many names would suffer! Nor does Whitman's attitude in any degree conform to the worshipful attitude of Wordsworth and so many other poets since his time. He did not humanize Nature or read himself into it; he did not adorn it as a divinity; he did not see through it as through a veil to spiritual realities beyond, as Emerson so often does; he did not gather bouquets of flowers, nor distill the wild perfumes in his pages; he did not fill the lap of earth with treasures not her own—all functions of true poetry, we must admit, and associated with great names. Yet he made more of Nature than any other poet has done; he saw deeper meanings in her for purposes of both art and life; but it was Nature as a whole—not the parts, not the exceptional phases, but the total scheme and unfolding of things.

He who can bring to Whitman's rugged and flowing lines anything like the sympathy and insight that beget them, will know what I mean. Our modern Nature-poets are holiday flower-gatherers beside this inspired astronomer, geologist, and biologist, all in one, sauntering the streets, loitering on the beach, roaming the mountains, or wrapt and silent under the midnight skies. When, now in my old age, I open his pages again and read the *Song of the Open Road*, *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, *The Song of the Broad Axe*, *This Compost*, *Walt Whitman*, *Great are the Myths*, *Laws for Creation*, and scores of others, I seem to be present at the creation of worlds. I am in touch with primal energies. I am borne along by a tide of life and power that has no parallel elsewhere in literature. It is not so much mind as it is personality, not so much art as it is Nature, not so much poetry as it is the earth, the sky. Oh, the large, free handling! the naked grandeur, the elemental sympathy, the forthrightness, and the power! Not beauty alone, but meanings, unities, profundities; not merely the bow in the clouds, but the clouds also, and the sky, and the orbs beyond the clouds. A personal, sympathetic, interpretive attitude toward the whole

of Nature, claiming it all for body and mind, drawing out its spiritual and esthetic values, forging his laws for creation from it, trying his own work by its standards, and seeking to emulate its sanity, its impartiality, and its charity.

Whitman wrote large the law of artistic productions which he sought to follow:

All must have reference to the ensemble of the world, and the compact truth of the world;

There shall be no subject too pronounced—All works shall illustrate the divine law of indirections.

What do you suppose creation is?

What do you suppose will satisfy the Soul, except to walk free, and own no superior?

What do you suppose I would intimate to you in a hundred ways, but that man or woman is as good as God?

And that there is no God any more divine than Yourself?

And that that is what the oldest and newest myths finally mean?

And that you or any one must approach creations through such laws?

Whitman's standards are always those of Nature and of life. Emerson hung his verses in the wind—a good thing to get the chaff out of poetry or wheat. Whitman brings his, and all art, to the test of the natural, universal standards. He read his songs in the open air to bring them to the test of real things; he emulated the pride of the level he planted his house by. Always is his eye on the orbs, and on the earth as a whole:

I feel the globe itself swift swimming through space.

I will confront the shows of day and night,

I will see if I am to be less real than they are.

He would have his songs tally "earth's soil, trees, winds, waves." "Can your performance face the open fields and the seaside?" he demands of those who would create the art of America.

I swear there is no greatness or power that does not emulate those of the earth,

There can be no theory of any account unless it corroborate the theory of the earth,

No politics, art, religion, behavior, or what not, is of account unless it compares with the amplitude of the earth,

Unless it face the exactness, vitality, impartiality, rectitude of the earth.

His poems abound in natural images and objects, but there is rarely a trace of the method and spirit of the so-called Nature-poets, some of whom bedeck Nature with jewelry and finery till we do not know her.

In one of his Nature jottings, written in 1878, at his country retreat not far from Camden, New Jersey, he speaks thus of the emotional aspects and influences of Nature: "I too, like the rest, feel these modern tendencies (from all the prevailing intellections, literature, and poems) to turn everything to pathos, ennui, morbidity, dissatisfaction, death. Yet how clear it is to me that those are not the born results, influences of Nature at all, but of our own distorted, sick, or silly souls. Here amid this wide, free scene, how healthy, how joyous, how clean and vigorous and sweet!"

I do not wonder that Whitman gave such a shock to the reading public sixty years ago. This return, in a sense, to aboriginal Nature, this sudden plunge into the great ocean of primal energies, this discarding of all ornamentation and studied external effects of polish and elaboration, gave the readers of poetry a chill from which they are still sneezing. The fireside, the library corner, the seat in the garden, the nook in the woods: each and all have their charm and their healing power, but do not look for them in Walt Whitman. Rather expect the mountain tops, the surf-drenched beach, and the open prairies. A poet of the cosmos, fortified and emboldened by the tremendous discoveries and deductions of modern science, he takes the whole of Nature for his province and dominates it, is at home with it, affiliates with it through his towering personality and almost superhuman breadth of sympathy.

To pick flaws in Whitman (an easy matter) is like picking flaws in Nature herself. We do not look at the heavens or at the earth with a microscope; and to get at the good that there is in Whitman, we must bring to him a candor, a charity, and a spiritual robustness equal to his own, and that "inner, never-lost rapport we have with earth, light, air, trees," and all created things.

JOHN BURROUGHS.